

Fire Communication and Education - Past, Present and Future...

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Roberta said it was important to discuss the past, present, and future of the fire education program because one can't tell where one is going if one doesn't know where one has been. She felt the best way to do this was to review some of the key points in fire history in the NPS and other agencies to see how perspectives on wildland fire have been shaped by history and how it is now viewed by the public, agencies, and other parties.

While attending the National Interpretive Advisory Board meeting at the 2002 National Association for Interpretation (NAI) Conference, Roberta told how a discussion about *The Maturation of Interpretation* described how the field of interpretation had evolved to a higher level of effectiveness. Comparing it to the new program of Fire Communication and Education, she wondered how far the program had come since it started and where it was going. She noted many people felt communication was like a magic wand, and *poof*, the lack of knowledge or misunderstandings would disappear instantaneously. Comparing it to the education of seat belts and recycling, she said fire communications and education was not a magic wand and to educate people takes time.

The analogy to the magic wand brought her back to the point that it will take a while to be successful in this program. To continue the discussion, she presented a brief history of where fire education and prevention had been.

- Federal fire protection began in national parks after the army assumed administration and protection of Yellowstone National Park in 1886.
- After the traumatic fire season of 1910, the U.S. Forest Service took on the primary role of fire suppression.
- In 1963, the Leopold Report that said fire was a part of the ecosystem, prompting changes in NPS fire policy.
- The 1950s saw fire as indispensable. Noted early years of fire program at Everglades and Sequoia and Kings Canyon National Parks.
- The 1960s were a formative time for NPS when fire research and agency attitude changes brought about the use of fire management and prescribed burn as a good way to manage forests.
- Alaska in the 1970's (this was addressed by Morgan Miller during "Open Mike" earlier in the day)
- In 1988 the Yellowstone fires changed public perception of fire from good to perhaps not-so-good [at least at the immediate time of the fire].
- In 1992, the book Young Men and Fire brought the reality of wildland fire to the public.
- In 1994, the loss of 14 firefighters on Storm King Mountain in Colorado brought about the 1995 fire policy.
- In 2000, the Cerro Grande fire occurred.

Some individuals have stated that the Cerro Grande Fire was the “birth” of the National Fire Plan. The National Fire Plan brought two additional things:

1. The development of the National Park Service Fire Communications and Education Program and the FEPIS positions.
2. The organization of a group to develop the National Park Service-National Fire Plan Communications Plan.

Discussion continued about strategic planning, visioning or the idea of what “desired futures” would be for the program. Roberta passed out the feedback received from the evaluations, which will help define what’s working and what’s not in Fire Communications and Education [see attached for evaluations].

- The first set of evaluations distributed contained comments from the various Fire Education, Prevention, and Information Specialists regarding their first year to year-and-a-half on the job. (SEKI being the most unusual, this position was established before the National Fire Plan).
- The second set was evaluations by the immediate supervisors of the Fire Education, Prevention, and Information Specialists and there were many good and constructive comments contained therein.
- The third set of evaluations solicited the comments and perspectives of colleagues, both NPS partners as well as other public and private partners regarding the work of the Fire Education, Prevention, and Information Specialists.

Roberta concluded with the idea that evaluating the lessons learned in order to evaluate where the program currently stands is feedback that could be used as background for the development of a strategic plan for fire communications and education that will shape the future of the program. Roberta noted that internal and external understanding of the Fire Education and Prevention Program has increased with the addition of communication and education positions in the field.

The need for a Fire Communication and Education Strategic Plan and perhaps a working committee was discussed and the consensus was that it was a good idea. April 2-4, 2003 were the dates proposed to meet with the facilitator, Wilma Strohmeier, to begin crafting a strategic plan and discussing the future direction of the Fire Communication and Education Program.